

Texting and talking while driving are really getting out of control, and the results are catastrophic.

Two years ago, more than 3,000 people were killed in crashes involving a distracted driver. Some 416,000 more were injured. For fatal accidents involving drivers under the age of 20, 11 percent were reported to be distracted.

According to the Department of Transportation, drivers who were distracted by text messaging were 23 times more likely to be in a crash than those with their attention on the road.

In rural areas such as Southern Missouri, our vehicles are often moving at a high rate of speed when we divert our attention from the task of driving. In a short period of time – just 4.6 seconds at 55 miles per hour – we can cover a football field. We might never see the deer, ditch, or other driver at the end of the 100 yards where we look away.

And distractions cover much more than talking or texting. Drivers put themselves, other drivers and passengers at risk when they are eating and drinking, talking to other passengers in the car, reading maps, using a navigation system, even just fiddling with the radio while the vehicle is in motion. Distracted driving covers every distraction.

The Missouri State Highway Patrol reminds us that driving is a "full-time job" and anything that diverts our attention from the task of driving can be deadly.

Countless examples of "My last text" demonstrate the haunting tragedy of the text message that led to the accident that caused a fatal accident. Yet over 90 percent of teenage drivers report seeing passengers distracting drivers or drivers using cell phones. And while the effects of distracted driving are pronounced in younger, less experienced drivers, it is true across all age groups that drivers who divert their attention from the road are more likely to end up driving right off it.

The responsibility to educate all drivers on the dangers of distraction starts at home. Passengers need to speak up if they are in a car with a driver who is not driving safely. And we can reinforce that message by being positive examples – and not picking up the phone to check a message or to take a call until we get to where we are going.

Following that simple set of priorities helps to ensure that we can all arrive alive at our destinations. The alternative scenario is that we end up becoming a statistic.

In 2010, there were 151,353 traffic crashes in our state, costing Missourians more than \$3 billion. Of those, 37,613 caused at least one injury and 778 cost at least one life. The Missouri State Highway Patrol points out that, at 821 total traffic fatalities, one person died in a crash every 10.7 hours.

No text, no call, and no distraction is worth a life.